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Made in Patriarchy: 
Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design

1) See, for example, Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Penguin, 1975); Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London: Architectural Press, 1975); Fiona MacCarthy, *A History of British Design, 1830-1970* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979); Open University, *History of Architecture and Design 1890-1939* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1975); John Heskett, *Industrial Design* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980). In these basic textbooks of design history, two or three women are consistently mentioned. Some books, such as those forming the Open University series, acknowledge more women designers, although in all cases the work of the women who make it into the history books could be described as modernist. More recently, Adrian Forty has acknowledged a few more women in his book *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750-1980* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986). Some historians have been careful to declare their biases when analyzing a particular period. For example, Penny Sparke, in the preface to her book, *An Introduction to Design and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), states, "I should also declare my bias where its subject matter is concerned. As I am dealing solely with the period after 1900, and with design in its most democratic sense, my main concern is with the relationship of design with mass-production industry" (p. xvi). She explains that she does not find craft or fashion irrelevant; indeed, she argues that they are extremely important. However, she focuses on specific areas of design and their relationship to one mode of production.

2) Consider as an example the near silence about women's involvement in the Bauhaus. Although women were trained and taught at the Bauhaus, the vast literature on the subject makes scant reference to women's interventions, both past and present, are consistently ignored. Indeed, the omissions are so overwhelming, and the rare acknowledgment so cursory and marginalized, that one realizes these silences are not accidental and haphazard; rather, they are the direct consequence of specific historiographic methods.

These methods, which involve the selection, classification, and prioritization of types of design, categories of designers, distinct styles and movements, and different modes of production, are inherently biased against women and, in effect, serve to exclude them from history. To compound this omission, the few women who make it into the literature of design are accounted for within the framework of patriarchy; they are either defined by their gender as designers or users of feminine products, or they are subsumed under the name of their husband, lover, father, or brother.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the patriarchal context within which women interact with design and to examine the methods used by design historians to record that interaction.

To a certain extent, this paper is also an attempt to pinpoint some of the key debates to have emerged in design history in Britain concerning the role of women and design. Most of these have taken feminist theory as their starting point. Feminist theory has been particularly useful in that it delineates the operation of patriarchy and the construction of the "feminine." It has shown how femininity is socially constructed and how sexuality and gender identity are acquired at conscious and unconscious levels in the family and through language acquisition. The work of feminist historians and art historians has also been important, especially the critiques of the discipline of history revealing the ideologica reasons for the silence about women.

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to their presence. (I include here Gillian Naylor's recent updated version of her early book on the Bauhaus.) We know a great deal about Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, Johannes Itten, and Wassily Kandinsky, but how much do we know about their female counterparts?

The Irish-born designer Eileen Gray has been defined by her gender as a feminine designer. Unlike her contemporary Le Corbusier, whose work has been consigned to the so-called decorative arts. It is only more recently that historians have noted her role in the European avant-garde as a modernist designer and architect. Margaret MacDonald and Louise Powell are examples of women designers whose work has been subsumed under their husband's names. Louise Powell was a pottery designer at Josiah Wedgwood and Sons in the early twentieth century. She worked with her husband Alfred Powell, and, until recently, he alone was credited with their joint contribution to new design development at Wedgwood. Margaret Macdonald is another woman designer whose work has been ignored in the history books. When she is acknowledged, it is only to account for a decorative element in work produced by her husband Charles Rennie Mackintosh, which debt is inconvenient to a historical analysis of Mackintosh as a full-fledged modernist. See, for example, Thomas Howarth, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

Women designers

Central to a feminist analysis of women's role in design is an examination of patriarchy. Patriarchy has circumscribed women's opportunities to participate fully in all areas of society and, more specifically, in all sectors of design, through a variety of means — institutional, social, economic, psychological, and historical. The resulting female stereotypes delineate certain modes of behavior as being appropriate for women. Certain occupations and social roles are designated female, and a physical and intellectual ideal is created for women to aspire to. These stereotypes have had enormous impact on the physical spaces — whether at home or at work — which women occupy, their occupations, and their relationship with design. Design historians who examine women's role in design must acknowledge that women in the past and women today are placed within the context of patriarchy, and that ideas about women's design abilities and design needs originate in patriarchy. Recent debate within feminist history and theory has highlighted the dependent relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and the ability of both to reshape and reformulate society in order to overcome potentially transforming processes.

To what extent, then, does patriarchy form the framework for women's role as designers? In a patriarchal, men's activities are valued more highly than women's. For example, industrial design has been given higher status than knitted textiles. The reasons for this valuation are complex. In an advanced industrial society in which culture is valued above nature, male roles are seen as being more cultural than natural; female roles are seen as the reverse of this.

8) Patriarchy as a concept has been defined by various feminist theorists. An early definition is found in Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 25: "Our society . . . is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political offices, finances — in short, every avenue of power within society, including the coercive force of the police, is in entirely male hands." The central problem with this definition of patriarchy is that it is a universal and trans-historical form of oppression that is being described. It presents specific problems for a Marxist feminist approach located in historical analysis. Sheila Rowbotham has argued in her essay "The Trouble with Patriarchy," *New Statesman* 98 (1979): 970, that this "implies a universal form of oppression which returns us to biology." A useful definition of patriarchy that attempts to overcome this problem of universal oppression is outlined by Griselda Pollock: "patriarchy does not refer to the static, oppressive domination of one sex over another, but a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex, which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable," in "Vision, Voice and Power," 10.

9) This debate is especially useful for the development of a feminist approach to design history and design practice within Western capitalist countries. (This paper does not aim to examine manifestations of patriarchy in non-capitalist countries, nor does it aim to examine design history and practice in those countries.) For useful discussions of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, see, for example, Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segre-

As a consequence of their biological capacity to reproduce and their roles within patriarchy of caring for and nurturing the family, women are seen as being close to nature. As Sherry Ortner has argued, "female is to male as nature is to culture." Even women designers, who through the design process transform nature into culture, are tied to their biology by patriarchal ideology, which defines their design skills as a product of their sex — as natural or innate. Women are considered to possess sex-specific skills that determine their design abilities; they are apparently dexterous, decorative, and meticulous. These skills mean that women are considered to be naturally suited to certain areas of design production, namely, the so-called decorative arts, including such work as jewelry, embroidery, graphic illustration, weaving, knitting, pottery, and dressmaking. Linking all these activities together is the notion that they are naturally female; the resulting design products are either worn by women or produced by them to fulfill essentially domestic tasks. Significantly, men can be the designers of clothes, textiles, or pottery, but first the design activities have to be redefined. Dressmaking, for example, has been seen as a "natural" area for women to work in. It is viewed as an obvious vehicle for their femininity, their desire to decorate, and their obsession with appearances. Fashion design, however, has been appropriated by male designers who have assumed the persona of genius — Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and, more recently, Karl Lagerfeld. Fashion as a design process is thought to transcend the sex-specific skills of dexterity, patience, and decorativeness associated with dressmaking. Instead, it involves creative imagination, and the aggressive business and marketing skills that are part of the male stereotype.

This practice of defining women's design skills in terms of their biology is reinforced by socially constructed notions of masculine and feminine, which assign different characteristics to male and female. Sonia Delaunay, the painter and designer, is noted by historians for her "instinctive" feeling for color, whereas her husband, Robert, is attributed as having formulated a color theory. Robert Delaunay embodies the male stereotype as logical and intellectual, Sonia embodies the female stereotype as instinctive and emotional. To compound this devaluation of women designers' work, designs produced by women in the domestic environment (their natural space within a patriarchy) are seen to represent use-value rather than exchange-value. The designs produced by women in a domestic environment (embroidery, knitting, and appliqué) are used by the family in the home rather than exchanged for profit within the capitalist marketplace. At this point capitalism and patriarchy interact to devalue this type of design; essentially, it has been made in the wrong place — the home, and for the wrong market — the family.

So, one result of the interaction of patriarchy and design is the
establishment of a hierarchy of value and skill based on sex. This is legitimized ideologically by dominant notions of femininity and materially by institutional practice. British art and design education at degree level, for example, reinforces this hierarchical and sexist split between male and female design activities. Because of sexism few women industrial design students survive to the end of their courses which are outside the female stereotype. They succeed well with fashion and textile students which are considered to be suited to female abilities, but fare badly with industrial design, which is considered male. 12

Design historians play an important role in maintaining assumptions about the roles and abilities of women designers by their failure to acknowledge the governance of patriarchy and its operation historically. As a result, women’s design is ignored and unrepresented in the history books. Clearly, then, one of the main issues for historians to tackle, if they are to account adequately for the role of women designers, is patriarchy and its value systems. First, the terms by which inferior status is assigned to certain design activities must be analyzed and challenged. The ideological nature of terms such as feminine, delicate, and decorative should be acknowledged within the context of women’s design. Second, it is crucial that design historians recognize the patriarchal basis of the sexual division of labor, which attributes to women certain design skills on the basis of biology. Third, they must acknowledge that women and their designs fulfill a critical structuring role in design history in that they provide the negative to the male positive—they occupy the space left by men. If, for instance, historians describe men’s designs as bold, assertive, calculated, then women’s designs are described as weak, spontaneous, or lacking in rationale. Design historians, then, should recognize that “because of the economic, social, and ideological effects of sexual difference in a western, patriarchal culture, women have spoken and acted from a different place within that society and culture.” 13 By their failure to acknowledge patriarchy, design historians ignore the real nature of women’s role in design, both for women designing outside of mainstream industrial design and for those few who have found employment within it. Both produce designs formed within patriarchy. Fourth, historians must take note of the value system which gives privilege to exchange-value over use-value, because at a very simple level, as Elizabeth Bird has pointed out, “the objects women produce have been consumed by being used, rather than preserved as a store of exchange-value. Pots get broken and textiles wear out.” 14

Historians must also beware of regarding the professional site of production more highly than the domestic site of production, because this inevitably leads to a focus on the value of design as it contributes to the capitalist system. This is problematic, irrespective of the sex of the designer, as it excludes an important area of
design production from history. Finally, historians should heed Sheila Rowbotham’s point, in Hidden From History: “[U]nbiased history simply makes no declaration of its bias, which is deeply rooted in existing society reflecting the views of the people of influence.”

Central to a feminist critique of design history is a redefinition of what constitutes design. To date, design historians have esteemed more highly and deemed more worthy of analysis the creators of mass-produced objects. Subsequently, they have argued that “design history . . . is a study of mass-produced objects.” Feminists have challenged this definition as prejudging the nature of design by emphasizing only one mode of production and thereby excluding craft production. This challenge is complicated by the development of craft history as an academic discipline distinct from design history, although, to date, craft historians have not dealt adequately with women’s craftwork. In fact, it has been dealt with in a cursory way and mirrors the approach of design historians by seizing upon a few famous names. Arguably, if a feminist approach to women’s design production is to be articulated, it must cut across these exclusive definitions of design and craft to show that women used craft modes of production for specific reasons, not merely because they were biologically predisposed toward them. To exclude craft from design history is, in effect, to exclude from design history much of what women designed. For many women, craft modes of production were the only means of production available, because they had access neither to the factories of the new industrial system nor to the training offered by the new design schools. Indeed, craft allowed women an opportunity to express their creative and artistic skills outside of the male-dominated design profession. As a mode of production, it was easily adapted to the domestic setting and therefore compatible with traditional female roles.

**Women as consumers and objects**

To date, most historical analysis has dealt solely with the role of women designers, even though women interact with design in a variety of ways. Feminist design historians have thereby adopted the methodologies of mainstream design history, which esteems the activities of designers and emphasizes their role as agents of history. (As I describe in the next section, there are serious problems inherent in this methodological technique.) Most important for this discussion is the point that design is a collective process involving groups of people beside the designer. In order to determine the meaning of a given design at a specific historical moment, it is necessary to examine these other groups.

Probably the most historically neglected group is the consumer; indeed, it can be no accident that the consumer is often perceived by design organizations, retailers, and advertisers to be female.
Just as patriarchy informs the historian's assumptions about women designers' skills, so it defines the designer's perceptions of women's needs as consumers. Two basic ideas inform the designer's assumptions about women consumers. First, women's primary role is in domestic service to husband, children, and home; and second, domestic appliances make women's lives easier. The first assumption stems from the central classification of patriarchy—the sexual division of labor. As Heidi Hartmann has argued, "the sexual division of labor is...the underpinning of sexual subcultures in which men and women experience life differently; it is the material base of male power which is exercised (in our society), not just in not doing housework and in securing superior employment, but psychologically as well." According to Hartmann, the sexual division of labor is not static, but in a state of flux, changing as required by economic, political, and social developments.

A relatively constant feature of the sexual division of labor, however, is the delineation of women's role as housewives and as carers for the family. This role is basically the same one that the Victorian social critic John Ruskin identified and glorified in his writings. As a result of this sexual division of labor, designers assume that women are the sole users of home appliances. Product advertising presents women as housewives who use domestic appliances and family-oriented products. When British advertisers make the rare representation of women driving motorcars, it is significant that they are not shown speeding along in a Porsche. Rather, they are shown parking their modest and convenient hatchback near the supermarket.

Design historians have played their part in reinforcing women's position in the sexual division of labor. In Reyner Banham's well-known celebration of the first machine age, he identified two sexes—men and housewives. Banham defined the female sex as housewives whose lives are transformed by "woman-controlled machinery," such as vacuum cleaners. Informing this paean to woman-controlled appliances is the belief that these products make women's lives easier. Banham, like other historians and theorists of design, fails to acknowledge that designs take on different meanings for the consumer than those designated by the designer, the manufacturer, and the advertiser. Philippa Goodall has outlined the reasons for these shifts of meaning. She cites the microwave oven and freezer as products designed ostensibly to lighten household chores but which have ultimately created more work. Both products have been widely introduced into the home under the pretext of convenience. The question, however, is convenience for whom—the housewife or the family? Convenience to the family means having rapid access to food at all times. To the housewife, this is not convenience. It is instead a duty, a duty to provide food at all times, even when the shops are shut or the market closed and most of the family has already eaten. Goodall
argues that, “In numerous such ways women’s work is increased, the qualitative demands raised. The tyranny of the whiter-than-white-wash is now for many a daily event, rather than a weekly one. ‘Simplicity,’ ‘convenience,’ ‘serving the loved ones better’ are slogans motivating and directing our work as consumers and producers.”

Advertising serves to enforce the meaning of design as defined by the designer or manufacturer. It stereotypes women as mothers, cleaners, cooks, and nurses in order to define and direct the market. In effect, the category woman, as constituted in patriarchy, is appropriated by advertising. Woman is either the subject of patriarchal assumptions about women’s role and needs as consumers, or the object in sexist advertising. As Jane Root has argued in relation to representations of women in TV advertising, “Women are often made absurdly ecstatic by very simple products, as though a new brand of floor cleaner or deodorant really could make all the difference to a lifetime.” Advertising creates both an ideal use for a product and an ideal user. The actuality of the use and user are unimportant when confronted with a powerful fantasy – the immaculate designer kitchen with superwoman in control, combining with ease the roles of careerist and perfect wife. Like television and cinema, advertising appropriates women’s bodies. Women are objects to be viewed; they are sexualized things whose status is determined by how they look. “These advertisements help to endorse the powerful male attitude that women are passive bodies to be endlessly looked at, waiting to have their sexual attractiveness matched with active male sexual desire.”

It is clear that analyses of patriarchy and the issue of gender are central to the debate concerning women’s role in design. Historians should map out the operation of patriarchy and make gender as a social construct distinct from sex as a biological condition. Gender is embodied in historical and contemporary representations of women as consumers, objects, and designers; but it does not remain fixed, having changed historically. They must remember that as a consequence of patriarchy, the experiences of male and female designers and consumers have been quite different. Design historians should outline the way that patriarchal definitions of women’s roles and design needs, which have originated in the sexual division of labor, have shaped design in the past and present. A feminist critique of design history must confront the problem of patriarchy, at the same time addressing itself to the exclusion of women in the historiographic methods used by design historians. Though many of these methods are problematic for design history in general, not just a feminist design history, feminist intervention, as in other disciplines, has demarcated the basic ones. Rozsika Parker described them as “the rules of the game.”
The rules of the game

Methodologically, the pivot of contemporary design history is the designer, whose central role has been legitimized by art historical precedent in which the figure of the artist is all-important. Some art historians, such as Nicos Hadjinicolaou, T. J. Clark, and Griselda Pollock, have done so; the last wrote, “The central figure of art historical discourse is the artist, who is presented as an ineffable ideal which complements the bourgeois myth of a universal, classless man . . . our general culture is furthermore permeated with ideas about the individual nature of creativity, how genius will always overcome social obstacles.”

Numerous biographies of designers have focused the production and meaning of design on the contribution of the individual. In this approach, design history mirrors art history in its role as attributor and authenticator. First, it attaches meaning to a name, thereby simplifying the historical process (by de-emphasizing production and consumption) and at the same time making the role of the individual all-important (by aiding and simplifying attribution). Second, as a direct consequence of this first strategy, historians have analyzed the design in terms of the designers’ ideas and intentions and in terms of the formal arrangement of elements (just as formalist art history analyzes a painting or sculpture), rather than as a social product. The design is thereby isolated from its material origins and function, and if it conforms to dominant definitions of “good” design, it and its designer are obvious candidates for the history books. At this point, the design has been firmly positioned within the confines of the individual designer’s oeuvre, aiding attribution and authentication of the design as art object and simplifying historical analysis. The history of design is reduced to a history of the designer, and the design is seen to mean and represent what the designer identifies. Extraordinary designs are judged in terms of creativity and individual extraordinariness. This is problematic for women, because “creativity has been appropriated as an ideological component of masculinity, while femininity has been constructed as man’s and, therefore, the artist’s negative.”

The notion that the meaning of design objects is singular and is determined by the designer is simplistic, ignoring the fact that design is a process of representation. It represents political, economic, and cultural power and values within the different spaces occupied, through engagement with different subjects. Its meaning is therefore polysemic and involves the interaction of design and recipient. Designs, as cultural products, have meanings encoded in them which are decoded by producers, advertisers, and consumers according to their own cultural codes. “All these codes and subcodes are applied to the message in the light of general framework of cultural references; in other words, the way the message is read depends on the receiver’s own cultural codes.”

31) Note the saleroom prices of design objects, especially the “classics,” such as furniture by Charles R. Mackintosh or pottery by Keith Murray.
These cultural codes are not absolute and are not controlled by the designer's intentions. Indeed, these intentions are constrained by the existing codes of form and representation, which shape cultural products. In effect, the designer has to use these to design. The dominant codes of design are both esthetic and social; the former "operate as mediating influences between ideology and particular works by interposing themselves as sets of rules and conventions which shape cultural products and which must be used by artists and cultural producers;"\(^{34}\) the latter are governed by modes of production, circulation, and use within a specific social situation. The codes or signs by which design is understood and constituted, in an industrial, capitalist society such as our own, are the product of bourgeois, patriarchal ideology. This ideology seeks to obscure its codes by presenting its designs as neutral and ideology-free and the receiver of these codes as universally constituted, that is, the singular and unproblematic user or producer. "[T]he reluctance to declare its codes characterizes bourgeois society and the culture issuing from it; both demand signs which do not look like signs."\(^{35}\) This obscureness presents problems for the historian who attempts to take account of the designer or consumer as gendered individuals with specific class allegiances who then bring particular sets of meaning to designs.

The focus on the designer as the person who assigns meaning to design is seriously challenged by developments in the fields of sociology, film studies, and linguistics, where debates on authorship have arisen. These critiques have questioned the centrality of the author as a fixed point of meaning. As Roland Barthes put it, "A text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination . . . the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."\(^{36}\) The centrality of the designer as the person who determines meaning in design is undermined by the complex nature of design development, production, and consumption, a process involving numerous people who precede the act of production, others who mediate between production and consumption, and those who use the design. The success or failure of a designer's initial concept depends on the existence of agencies and organizations which can facilitate the development, manufacture, and retailing of a specific design for a distinct market. Design, then, is a collective process; its meaning can only be determined by an examination of the interaction of individuals, groups, and organizations within specific societal structures.

The monograph, the primary method used by historians to focus on the designer, is an inadequate vehicle for exploring the complexity of design production and consumption. It is especially inadequate for feminist design historians in that the concentration on an individual designer excludes from the history books unnamed, unattributed, or collectively produced design. Historical casualties of this exclusion are the numerous craft works produced.


37) This type of craftwork is still produced by women today; note particularly the production of knitted textiles in Britain.

38) Here I do not intend to deny the possibility of an autonomous realm of creativity; rather, I want to suggest that the designers' meanings are combined with a series of meanings gained from the interaction of the design with other groups and agencies. To understand design at a specific historical moment requires rather more from the historian than an analysis of what the designer thought.

39) Goodall, "Design and Gender," 50.


41) Matrix, Making Space, 11.

by women in their own homes, often in collaboration with other women. Nor can women's relationship with design as consumers and as objects of representation figure in the construction of the monograph. The recent critiques of authorship have proved useful to feminist design historians by highlighting the inadequacy of the monograph as a method of analyzing design and by showing that designers do not design merely by courtesy of innate genius, but that they have been constituted in language, ideology, and social relations. The designer can usefully be considered as the first of many who will affix meaning to design.

From this discussion emerge two other important points for analyzing women's relationship to design. First, women's cultural codes are produced within the context of patriarchy. Their expectations, needs, and desires as both designers and consumers are constructed within a patriarchy which, as I have argued, prescribes a subservient and dependent role to women. The other side of that point is that the codes of design, as used by the designer, are produced within patriarchy to express the needs of the dominant group. They are, therefore, male codes. As Philippa Goodall has observed, "We live in a world designed by men. It is not for nothing that the expression 'man-made' refers to a vast range of objects that have been fashioned from physical material." In Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment, the Matrix group of feminist architects argue that male architects and planners design urban and domestic spaces using a language which defines women's role according to patriarchal values: "[T]he physical patterning of this 'natural' setting contains many assumptions about women's role outside the home. It leads, for instance, to housing layouts based on 'rural' meandering paths which imply that the journeys of women . . . are without presence. . . . The implication is that journeys that are not fast or in straight lines are not really going anywhere." Matrix point out that this patriarchal design language has implications for women training to be architects, as well as for those who use buildings. Women architects are expected to adopt values and codes of form and representation formulated within the context of patriarchy. They are expected to "acquire an outlook similar to that of middle-class males, the dominant group in the architectural profession."

The second point is this: to legitimize this process of cultural coding, the language of design is presented as a universal truth. Exclusive definitions of good and bad design are constructed, based almost entirely on esthetics. These definitions serve to isolate design products from the material and ideological conditions of production and consumption. Inevitably, these definitions also serve the interests of the dominant group, which attempts to disguise its interests with the mask of universality. Design historians have played a central role in the acceptance and reiteration of these definitions of good design, presenting them as unproblematic. As
Rosalind Coward explained, these are in fact "nothing other than the individual expression of general class taste and the particular ideas promoted in that class."42 Pierre Bourdieu has argued that taste is determined through specific social conditions, such as education level, social class, and gender.43 He has shown that dominant groups retain their positions of power and enhance their status by specific mechanisms, one of which is to invent the "esthetic" category as a universal entity.

The esthetic theory which informed these dominant notions of good design and good taste, and which legitimized the analysis of design as distinct objects, was modernism. The theory of modernism has had an enormous impact on design history by emphasizing both formal and technical innovation and experimentation as the significant features of design. Although designers now operate in a postmodernist context, many design historians unconsciously adopt modernist criteria when deciding what should enter the history books. The concept of differentness is still privileged by historians, thus revealing the structural relationship between historians and the designs they promote within capitalism. Innovative and new designs have a crucial role to play in capitalist production, a system that demands greater production and consumption stimulated by designer-created difference and codified by design historians and theorists.

The theory of modernism has had significant implications for historical evaluations of both mass-produced design, which is traditional in style, form, material, or production techniques, and for craft. These evaluations are largely nonexistent because design that is not innovative and experimental has rarely been analyzed by design historians.44 Women's design, which often falls under the label of traditional, has been especially ignored.45 Another area of design associated with women to have fared badly in the hands of modernist design historians is fashion design, arguably the most extreme manifestation of modernism, in that throughout the twentieth century it has been continuously innovative and experimental. Like modernist art and design, its meaning is tied to that of its predecessors. It is therefore possible (though highly undesirable) to analyze fashion in purely formal terms, and here the problem lies. Unlike other modernist cultural forms, fashion makes no claims to represent universal truth and good taste.46 Indeed, the converse is true, in that fashion subverts dominant notions of good design by eagerly accepting what was previously considered ugly. It undermines universal concepts of quality and taste, and it foregrounds the relativism in notions of beauty. Furthermore, fashion as an important area of design is trivialized because of its association with women. It is seen as a marginal design activity because it caters to women's socially constructed needs and desires.47 For these reasons, design historians have tended to avoid the study of fashion.48
Women and design as a subject of study highlights a whole set of issues and problems that must be confronted by historians if a feminist design history is to be articulated. The desire for a feminist design history grows increasingly urgent as we acknowledge the paucity of histories of women and design that have taken proper account of patriarchal notions of women's skills as designers, the stereotyped perceptions of women's needs as consumers, and the exploitative representation of women's bodies in advertising. It is crucial that these historical analyses of women and their relationship with design are based on feminism. Without recourse to feminist theory to delineate the operation of patriarchy, and to feminist history to map out women's past, it is impossible to understand fully the way women interact with design and the way historians have recorded that interaction. Attempts to analyze women's involvement in design that do not take issue with gender, the sexual division of labor, assumptions about femininity, and the hierarchy that exists in design, are doomed to failure.

Feminist design historians must advance on two fronts. First, we must analyze the material and ideological operation of patriarchy in relation to women and design. This effort must be combined with an examination of the relationship between capitalism (if we are discussing design in capitalist societies) and patriarchy at specific historical conjunctures to reveal how women's role in design is defined. Second, we must critically assess “the rules of the game” to understand why design historians have excluded women from the history books, and then to enable us to develop a history that does not automatically exclude women. This history must acknowledge the various locales where design operated and the various groups involved with its production and consumption. It must reject the temptation to analyze the individual designer as sole determiner of meaning in design. Finally, historians must not lose sight of their central objective: To develop and expand the body of historical research which seeks to account for women's relationship to design and then set this research firmly within a historical framework of feminist design.

48) Note that fashion design is not included in any of the basic surveys of nineteenth- and twentieth-century design history, even though it is undoubtedly the product of social, technical, political, and cultural developments which parallel other areas of design.

49) See Isabelle Anscombe, A Woman's Touch: Women in Design from 1860 to the Present Day (London: Virago, 1984). This is an example of such an account. See my review in Art History, Journal of the Association of Art Historians Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 1986): 400-403.